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ABSTRACT

Mnemonic devices can help or hinder young children's efforts to learn. An example of the facilitative use of mnemonics is Lyn Wendon's Pictogram System, an approach to reading and spelling that pairs intrinsically interesting images with letters of the alphabet and their combinations. The sentence "Arthur Ar has a get-away car" illustrates her approach to making the "ar" combination memorable. Less well thought out uses of mnemonics with young children can have unexpected results, as when elementary school students learning to spell "wagon" added spokes to the "o" when told to remember that a wagon has wheels. While there is a place for mnemonics in teaching young children, the use of mnemonics should be based on the uniqueness of the child, the material to be learned, and the purpose for learning it. It seems wise to concentrate on good learning strategies, which are good memory devices, rather than on complex and ambiguous mnemonic devices. Mnemonics well used, however, help and encourage children to create their own memory devices, which, of course, are easier to remember. (RH)

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Mnemonics and the Very Young Children: A Position Taken

Susan Partridge

Webster (12) defines mnemonics thus: "The art of developing or improving the memory; a system of precepts and rules intended to improve the memory." Kenneth L. Higbee (7), who has done extensive research in memory training, defines the word mnemonics as "aiding the memory." He adds that, typically, the term refers more specifically to rather unusual memory techniques.

Dr. Higbee differentiates between mnemonic systems and mnemonic devices. The former can be used over and over to learn different kinds of material, the latter with specific purposes. For example, the verse, "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue," might help some to remember that date, but it would not serve in remembering other dates whereas mnemonic systems - Loci, Link, Phonetic and Peg - are more general; they are not one-purpose techniques.

This paper, as the title suggests, is concerned with the very young and, therefore, will not deal with elaborate mnemonic systems but rather with mnemonic devices/systems that are akin to good learning strategies - strategies that have stood the test of time. It will also offer some pitfalls that experience, a great, if costly, teacher has taught to avoid.

The field of mnemonics is by no means new, but for years there was little, if any, research interest in it. There are probably several reasons for this, one of which might be that scientists thought of mnemonics as "gimmickry". Fairly recently

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(in terms of the "sparse" years) there has been a revived interest in the field.

In the April 1983 issue of Reading, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston for the United Kingdom Reading Association, there appeared an article entitled "Researcher's Challenge," by Lyn Wendon. Ms. Wendon (13) told of reading and spelling success records of primary schools in widely varying socio-economic areas all over the country using her Pictogram System, and she challenged researchers to attend to these success records and the skills of the teachers using the System and thus, possibly, "reduce the numbers of unknowns in our understanding of how children learn to read and spell well."

Ms. Wendon stated that her first aim when she made picture mnemonics intrinsic to letter shapes was "to make intrinsically uninteresting letters of the alphabet into something intrinsically interesting." Originally, the System was intended for use in remedial teaching, but was so effective in this context that it spread into the mainstream of class teaching. In addition to her first aim, Ms. Wendon aimed "to emphasize as many distinguishing features as possible of both letter shape and orientation." Her third aim was "to eliminate rote learning."

Some examples used in Ms. Wendon's System as well as some witnessed throughout decades of educational work are offered to enable the reader to understand or reject the position taken.

Ms. Wendon's lower-case d is represented by a duck. The duck's head is drawn, facing right, at the top of the ascending

stroke, and tail feathers are drawn at the lower left side of the circle. Mirrored, the picture has the duck walking in the opposite direction and the lower-case d becomes a b, a problem not unknown to some children.

"Arthur Ar" is Ms. Wendon's (14) character reminder of the ar combination, and is aimed at assisting children in the correct use of this combination. One example is the word, farm, spelled f-r-m-e by some children who substitute the letter name r for ar. Arthur Ar, the robber, has stolen an apple, and is carrying it in a bag slung over his shoulder and hanging quite low behind him. The apple representing the short sound of the letter "a" is in line with, and to the right of, the letter "f" which has been written. Obviously, the short "a" is gone, and Arthur Ar's name is a reminder of the joint sound of "ar." The picture-coding is a help, too, for those with transpositional errors such as f-r-a-m for f-a-r-m. Arthur Ar has a get-away car, thus offering further support in learning the "ar" combination. Since a car is familiar to most children, and, since many little boys, especially, like cars, it seems that it might be simpler to opt for "car" in the first place.

Ms. Wendon's articles brought to mind a number of instances of the use of mnemonic devices witnessed throughout decades of educational work. A few follow as a reminder of the care that must be made in suggesting or teaching mnemonic devices.

A conscientious principal, trying to help little children confusing "b" and "d" said something to this effect, "You want

to be right, don't you? Remember, then, that the circle is on the right of the straight line." There are children, of course, who don't know right from left.

He reminded the children who spelled "wagon" with an "i" or "e" instead of an "o" that a wagon has wheels. He then proceeded to draw spokes in the "o" as a reminder. It was observed that children who were well able to spell "wagon" correctly were adding spokes to their "o's".

He gave two suggestions regarding the use of "er" instead of the correct "ar" in "separate." "You have a rat in the trap. Don't let him go," was one. "You drive a car at a rate of speed," was the second.

A young teacher was seen holding little children's attention with her story of "oo". She had drawn a scary eye in each "o", and was informing the children that the scary creature was shouting "boo", and that they, being frightened, were crying "oo". She concluded by telling them that every time they saw two o's together to think of this story. When asked what would happen when they saw two o's together in words such as book, look, etc., she was speechless. "Simply never thought of it!" she exclaimed.

Some unnecessary "ooing" and "booing" and the fact that "short oo" was forgotten are reminders of the many avenues of thought that must be considered by teachers as they offer aids to children.

The above acounts are in no way intended to discourage the

use of mnemonic devices. Who is there who hasn't used them - and effectively - at one time or another? As a matter of fact, some are quite generally known, though others are highly individual. "Thirty days hath September --", "The ABC Song", and tying a string around the finger are common. Furthermore, there is research evidence showing the effective use of mnemonics.

It has been said that memory and learning are inseparable. Surely some effective strategies used in learning are aids to memory. Among these strategies are organization, association, visualization and meaning.

It is generally conceded that people can remember words that mean something to them more easily than words that do not. It is much more important for children to understand the meaning of what they are learning than to memorize things that have no meaning for them; thus they can use what they have learned to connect, or associate, new knowledge with things learned previously.

Given the proper guidance and feedback, little children can learn to organize - sort things - put together things that belong together and in this way make them easier to remember.

There are many young children who can visualize objects with amazing clarity, and yet there are those for whom visualization is difficult and for whom verbal mediators would be better.

Michael C. Rose, et al (10) investigated the effects of verbal rehearsal, visual imagery, and "unaided instruction" on reading comprehension in learning-disabled children. They found

that the children's reading comprehension improved after a brief training in mnemonic strategies and that verbal rehearsal appeared to be more effective with young learning-disabled children.

It is generally conceded that abstract words are harder to visualize than concrete words. It is difficult to see the "ifness" of "if", for example, but many children have seen an apple, have eaten an apple, have smelled it, and some, perhaps, have picked an apple, and, therefore, have little difficulty in making a mental picture of it.

It goes without saying that interest and attention play a large part in learning and remembering. Higbee states the part mnemonics play in this regard when he says, "Mnemonic systems force you to concentrate on the material to form pictures and associate them. They tend to be interesting because they make the material meaningful and involve visual imagery."

Emotions, too, play an important part in learning and remembering. If children are in a happy mood when new information is presented, they are more likely to grasp and retain it. Remedial reading teachers can attest to the fact that it is extremely difficult to change the negative attitude toward reading of the child who has experienced defeat and humiliation as he/she has tried to learn to read.

Success reports, complete with statistics, as well as many testimonials, have been read and heard throughout the years for so many methods, techniques, programs, systems, approaches -

call them what you will - among them the Fernald technique, Montessori's method, the Doman, Delacto rationale, the Orton-Gillingham system, I.T.A., programming, various "individualized" programs, the neurological-impress method, computer-assisted programs and basal readers. This seems to indicate that there are many ways by which children learn to read. Decades of experience have been convincing in the belief that there is no one way to teach all children to read and that the program used with individual children should be based on their uniqueness. A program relying on any one approach - phonics, mnemonics, sight words, etc. - raises a number of questions, some of which follow:

1. Success granted, would some of the children have learned as well, or even better, with a different approach?
2. What will be the long-term effect on the children? Will they be readers? What will they read? Will they profit by it? Will they take their part in a thinking citizenry, so essential in a democracy?

On the bases of decades of experience and a review of recent research on mnemonics, a position is taken:

There is a place for mnemonics in teaching young children, but it is felt that its use should be based on the uniqueness of the child, the material to be learned, and the purpose for

learning it. This, then, precludes the exclusive use of any one program for all children.

It seems wise to concentrate on good learning strategies which are, in effect, good memory devices, rather than on complex and ambiguous mnemonic devices. Since thinking can't be done in a vacuum, it is necessary to learn some basic facts and principles on which to rely as new thoughts and ideas are conceived. Too, offering profitable mnemonics to the children helps and encourages them to create their own memory devices which, of course, are easier to remember.

Implications for Teachers

1. Individualize instruction to the greatest extent possible. Carol M. Kates (8) has offered some encouragement in this regard:

> Individualized instruction does not necessarily mean one-to-one teacher student ration. It involves prescriptive/diagnostic techniques and instruction which encourage optimum learning for each student. It is based on the belief that learning styles may be different (but different is not negative). Preplanning, timing/scheduling, evaluation, and organizing work materials are important elements for facilitating individualized instruction in your classroom.

2. Create a happy, challenging, but not overwhelming, atmosphere in the classroom.

3. Avoid distracting, ambiguous and complex mnemonic devices.

4. Don't teach mnemonics in isolation. Lyn Gelzheiser et al (4) state the negative effects of instruction which has done this: "Skills have been taught which have required so much of the learner's attention to complete that they have precluded the possibility that the learner could focus on the goal of the task."

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